

OLNEY WINSOR'S "MEMORANDUM" OF THE PHENOMENAL "DARK DAY" OF MAY 19, 1780

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THROUGH THE COURTESY OF Mr. Robert S. Preston of East Providence, I am able to make an addition and a correction to the memorandum of Olney Winsor which was printed in *Rhode Island History*, volume 25, number 3 (July, 1966), pp. 84-86. The correction is that Winsor's account of the great hurricane of September 23, 1815, was not in the third volume of Backus's history of New England owned by the John Carter Brown Library but in the third volume which is in the John Hay Library of Brown University. The addition is that in the front and back flyleaves of volume one of Olney Winsor's copy of Backus's history (now owned by Mr. Preston) is written the following eyewitness account of the famous "Dark Day" of May 19, 1780—an account which has not heretofore been printed. Mr. Preston has kindly let me see his copy of this volume from which I have transcribed the account as it appears in Winsor's hand:

Memorandum

That on the 19th of May 1780,

a very uncommon [*sic*], & in the present age unheard of, Darnkness [*sic*] covered the Earth—the morning was cloudy, but not darker than usual—at about 11, O'Clock the Clouds appeared of a yello[w] cast, the reflection of wch. gave that cast to all around us, the darkness still increasing untill about half after 12 O'Clock, at which time it was so dark that People in general made use of Candles to dine [word torn out] The darkness then began to decrease very much in the same degree that it came on—At about three O'Clock The Clouds resumed their natural [*sic*] black & it continued to be a dark after noon—It began to rain at about 8 O'Clock in the Evening—

Peoples conjectures of this uncommon Phenomenon were various—as the moon full'd the day past, it could not be a common eclipse of the Sun (if she was eclipsed it must be by some plannet [*sic*] of whose course the Astronomers have no knowledge,

none having mentioned it) — There appeared a great collection of Clouds & they very low, which may be the natural Cause. —

Memo. the 20th May — Those that were out the last Night say that it was as much darker than common Nights as yesterday was than common Days. —

O. W.

It may be worth comparing this account to those of John Howland and the Rev. Isaac Backus, both of which reveal that many persons, including President James Manning of Brown, found divine portents in the phenomenon. Howland's eyewitness account reads:

In the forenoon, say nine o'clock, I was reading Voltaire's life of Charles XII, of Sweden. Near the close of the volume, I found it grew very dark, but supposed it to be nothing more than a thickening up of the clouds. But the darkness increased, and having arrived at the last page, I threw some shavings on the fire, and by the light finished it. I then went into the street, where many persons were assembled, apparently in astonishment at the darkness, among others Dr. Manning. A powerful man, but profligate, advanced up to the president, and said, 'how do you account for this darkness, sir? What does it mean?' The president, with great solemnity of manner, replied, 'I consider it, sir, as a prelude to that great and important day when the final consummation of all things is to take place.'

The Darkness appeared as if something palpable was mixed with the air, and everything assumed the color of dry oak leaves. At noon I observed candles lighted in the neighboring houses, when I went home to dinner. Though we had fine roast veal and asparagus, none of the large family had appetite to partake of them but myself. In the evening, the blackest darkness was so palpable that a candle at the window gave no light outside. I placed a candle at the window and went out to observe the effect. The alley was but twenty feet wide, yet the large building on the opposite side could not be discerned. The light did not appear to penetrate more than half a yard from the window. [Edwin M. Stone, *Life and Recollections of John Howland* (Providence, 1857), pp. 289-290.]

The Rev. Isaac Backus of Middleborough, Massachusetts (and a trustee of Brown University) noted in his unpublished diary entry for

that date that rural people shared President Manning's view of the phenomenon:

May 19, 1780. The clouds and vapors were so thick over us that at noon day it was darker than ordinary moonlight so that many light up candles to eat their dinner by; and many in town and countrey [*sic*] thought the day of judgment was come. Elnathan Wood, Asael Shaw, Wachthy Pool, and others were brought out of soul darkness today. [The manuscript diary is currently on loan to the John Carter Brown Library from Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Massachusetts.]

Those who would like to read a more detailed and scientific contemporary account of the Dark Day may refer to the article by Samuel Williams, professor of mathematics and philosophy at Harvard, which appeared in the *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, volume I (Boston, 1785), pp. 234-246. Professor Williams concluded after a thorough study of all the evidence, that the darkness was caused by a combination of smoke and heavy clouds; the smoke came from "large and extensive fires" in the woods of York, Maine, of New Hampshire, and of Vermont where "the people in the new towns had been employed in clearing their lands" for "two or three weeks before" by burning them off. A combination of southwest winds and cloudy skies produced "this extraordinary darkness" throughout the whole of southern New England on May 19. In fact, Williams reported, "from the accounts that have been received, it seems to have extended all over the New England states. It was observed as far east as Falmouth. To the westward, we hear of its reaching the furthest part of Connecticut and Albany. To the southward it was observed all along the sea-coasts, and to the north as far as our settlements extend." And "with regard to its duration, it continued in this place [Cambridge] at least fourteen hours." Williams stated that one observer noticed upon the water in rain tubs after showers that day "a light scum . . . which rubbing between my thumb and finger, I found to be nothing but the black ashes of burnt leaves." Williams found a similar substance upon the seashore when the tide fell and noted, for those who were expecting the fire and brimstone of the Judgment Day, that it was merely the same "black ashes of burnt leaves without any sulphureous or other mixtures."